



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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In biblical times prophets were the chosen people among the Chosen People. They emerged out of nowhere, performed their divine mission and vanished again into oblivion, usually violently, leaving behind only that irrefutable communication of the will of the Lord.

It is hard to believe that there was no prophetic word or warning when we were in mortal danger in the spring of 1938 after Hitler had entered Vienna in triumph, threatening to destroy "World Jewry." It was immediately obvious to me, then barely 18 years old, that if I didn't find a way to leave soon, I wouldn't survive much longer. At that time Austria encouraged its unwanted Jews to get out, but other countries would accept only those wealthy enough not to have to work for a living and not many were. I certainly wasn't. In spite of constant rejection I went from one consulate to another at random, begging for asylum and a visum permitting entry. The lines outside were long, the doors were usually barred and frequently I spent the night on the sidewalk to be among the first to be admitted the next day.

One morning I was again on my way to the consulates when I passed a small group of people on the Schottenring, which were crowding each other to look at something going ^{on} the ground which I couldn't see. When I forced my way through for a quick look, I was faced with a fairly common sight for that time and place: There were two men on their hands and knees on the ground, dressed in the black garb of the ultra-orthodox Jews, wearing side-locks, long beards and skull caps with a bucket of water between them. Standing over them were two nazi troopers, who had given them toothbrushes to scrub the sidewalk with. Shouting and kicking, they were yelling at them to work faster and pointed out spots that had been "overlooked."

The crowd was delighted with the entertainment that was being provided for them, laughing, cheering and encouraging the tormentors with their whole-hearted support. I could not risk showing my disgust openly. I depended on my "Arian looks" for some measure of protection and had learned to reinforce that by wearing my Tyrolean peasant jacket and shorts (Loden Janker, kurze Hosen und Stutzen). That way I could conduct my trips through the city in relative safety. To blow my cover would have made the situation only worse, not better.

I was just about to leave and go about my business when I became aware of a person which had just joined the group and whose presence I perceived only indirectly since she was too small to be visible to me. But what she lacked in size she made up for in activity and it was the commotion that she caused that had brought her initially to my attention. When she finally emerged, I saw that she was a gentile old lady, dressed in a worn black taffeta garment no longer fashionable, with hat to match, apparently one of the drifter/beggar women of uncertain mental competence that inhabits the parks and flophouses of big cities. She had energetically pushed her way through the crowd to confront the two Nazis whom she now proceeded to threaten with her umbrella and berate in a high-pitched, grating voice.

"You brutes," she yelled, "you lousy brats, no-good lazy bums!" she screeched. "What are you doing to these holy men?" and she pushed and slapped the troopers. The men on the ground continued their scrubbing and pretended to be unaware of the

commotion going on above them. The Nazis, suddenly on the defensive, tried to ignore the woman, unwilling to confront such a determined and unexpected enemy directly, which only invigorated her further. The umbrella found its mark again and again and the tormentors uttered mock-complaints, but the old lady was not to be placated easily. "Is this how we are supposed to act?" she asked rhetorically. "You just wait," she screamed, "you just wait. The Lord will punish you for what you are doing here. I can promise you He will. Soon you will have to face His terrible judgement and you cannot escape it!"

The crowd, spellbound by this new turn of events, had sobered and become quiet and - realizing that the fun was now over - wearily began to disperse. The bullies stood chastised and ill-at-ease and even the victims had stopped their scrubbing. The problem being resolved, I decided to leave to continue my search for that elusive, all-important stamp in my passport.

During the many years that have passed since then I have often re-lived that event and wondered what might have become later of the main-characters in that black comedy, which was to turn soon into a frightful tragedy. I feel certain that if they had survived the perils of the next few years, the rabbis would have disappeared into the deathcamps that incinerated millions. It also seems quite likely that the Nazis might have met their fate on the frozen plains of Russia and the old lady too must have soon gone to her Lord, the one whom she had so fearlessly and eloquently represented.

Her strident voice will forever echo in my ears, for a prophet may be without honor in her own country, but when she speaks her piece, she will be heard and - ultimately - remembered...

